



Transcript
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Michigan Radio Stateside Interview with Rachel Clark and Kevin Boyle | Ossian Sweet

Lester Graham: Earlier this year it was announced that a house at 2905 Garland St. on Detroit's East Side will be preserved. The reason: it was the former home of Dr. Ossian Sweet. And we're going to find out about Ossian Sweet in just a second, but joining us to tell why he's being recognized is the Michigan History Center's Rachel Clark. Welcome.

Rachel Clark: Hi, thank you.

Lester Graham: And Kevin Boyle, a professor of history at Northwestern University and the author of *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. Hi there.

Kevin Boyle: Hi.

Lester Graham: So Rachel, let's start at the beginning. Prior to becoming a part of Detroit's history, who was Dr. Ossian Sweet?

Rachel Clark: Ossian Sweet was born in Florida. His parents were farmers, they owned a farm in south-central Florida, kind of south of Lakeland, Florida. They had a big family. They still struggled, but they did pretty well, and in the early 1900s, the racial violence in Florida started to increase. And so, by 1909, Ossian Sweet had witnessed a lynching and his parents decided that it was time for him to move. He had also started getting older and his education, educational opportunities in Florida were starting to wear out. So they sent him north, and he wound up at River Forest College in Ohio. Later, Howard University for his medical credentials. And then by 1921 he's in Detroit.

Lester Graham: Kevin, so these events that Ossian experienced prior to arriving in Detroit helped shaped his understanding of the world, especially when he was at university. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

Kevin Boyle: Sure! As Rachel said, he grew up at exactly the time the southern system of segregation was consolidating, and that was an incredibly violent process. So his little town had a number of lynchings activity. And then as he moved up to the North, he was on the early edges of what would become the Great Migration, and that racial violence followed him north. For instance, while he was in medical school at Howard in Washington D. C. in 1919, there was a terrible, vicious race riot in Washington D. C. in the summer of 1919 that came right up towards Howard University. Then when he moved to Detroit, Detroit was in the midst of segregating too in slightly different ways than the South had, and that was an incredibly violent process in Detroit. In the summer of '25, which is the summer he bought his house over on Garland Avenue, there were four or five mob violence incidents over on the West Side, in the expanding black community on the West Side. Four African Americans were driven out of their homes by white mobs. He was friends with some of the victims of that violence.

Lester Graham: Let's talk about Detroit in the mid '20s. What kind of a city was it, Rachel?

Rachel Clark: It was growing. You're seeing a change in population. You have the migration from the South is beginning. You have immigration from war-torn Europe, or formerly war-torn Europe. So it's beginning to grow, and grow quite quickly. One of the big draws from Detroit were the jobs, and most people think of just the auto industry, but there were so many other industries that were pulling people in. You have steel mills, stockyards, train yards, hotels, restaurants, lumber yards. There were so many industries in Detroit that were starting to boom in the '20s. That is just drawing people in from all over.

Lester Graham: So Kevin, you've got this booming city prior to the Great Depression, but not everybody was benefitting in the same way. What kind of inequities were there in a city like Detroit?

Kevin Boyle: Detroit was a severely divided city. And it was divided in all sorts of ways. It was, as Rachel said, it was an immigrant city. And the native-born, really there was a huge opposition to immigration. There were huge tensions over class. But the most volatile and destructive dividing line was the growing color line. The black population was growing really dramatically, and as that happened, whites in Detroit increasingly started to draw very stark color lines in various parts of city life.

Lester Graham: So, here comes a physician. Dr. Sweet moves in, starts a medical practice in Detroit, and was fairly successful.

Kevin Boyle: Absolutely! Yeah, if there's one thing about Dr. Sweet, he was an excellent businessman. So when he moved in in Detroit, in 1921, when he came to Detroit straight out of medical school, he opened his practice in the African American neighborhood down on the East Side in what was called "Black Bottom," and he was very successful. He did really well for himself. And like successful Americans throughout the American Experience, he decided to move up.

Lester Graham: Now, right, his practice was growing, his family was growing. They needed a bigger home. What kind of obstacles did he face in buying a larger home in Detroit?

Kevin Boyle: That's the heart of the story in my mind. Until really about 1920, '21, '22, well-to-do African Americans in the city, doctors, lawyers, they generally lived in white neighborhoods. It was completely common. Nobody was really uptight about that. But as that black population increased, then more and more whites insisted that African Americans couldn't live in their neighborhoods. It didn't matter whether they were well-to-do. It didn't matter if they could afford the house. Their mere presence was going to be objectionable. And so when Dr. Sweet went off to find a house for himself and his wife and their baby, they had a little girl, he ran into the classic, or becoming, the standard obstacles of segregation. He couldn't get white realtors to show him any property. In white neighborhoods, where he assumed he was going to live, he couldn't find a place to move in outside of the African American neighborhoods. The East Side African American neighborhood was very poor. He didn't want to live there, he was a successful man. The West Side neighborhood was more middle class, but West Side is a long way from the East Side, and that's where his work was! And his wife's family was on the East Side too. So he wanted to live on the East Side, and he

ran into all these obstacles that were put in the way of African Americans who wanted to move into white neighborhoods.

Lester Graham: So he finally does find a house. What happened after the Sweet family moved in to 2905 Garland St.?

Kevin Boyle: They moved in on September 8, 1925. Because of this violence over the summer, over on the West Side, where African Americans had moved into white neighborhoods, he understood this was a huge risk. And so he arranged for the first few nights to have family and friends come with him into the house to defend it. So they had eleven people altogether: Dr. Sweet and Mrs. Sweet, two of Dr. Sweet's brothers, a couple of cousins and some family friends. Eleven people in the house in case there was trouble. First night, there was trouble. September 8th, a huge crowd of people, white people, out on the street around this house, but nobody did anything. There wasn't any violence, they just kind of milled around. There were police there to guard the house, but no one inside the house really trusted that the police would do something when push came to shove. Literally, when push came to shove. Second night, it all happened again. Some time around 7:30 or 8:00 that night, it was starting to get dark. The crowd comes out, hundreds and hundreds of white people. It's on the corner, the corner of Garland and Charlevoix. It's a corner house, which means the mob can be on two sides. They're out on the street, hundreds and hundreds of white people, police on the sidewalk. African Americans, eleven people, inside the house. Then one thing happened out on the street, and some members of that white mob out on the street start throwing stones at the house. And when that happens, the African Americans inside the house bear arms. They brought guns with them, how else are you going to defend the house otherwise? Some of them opened fire, and they killed one member of the mob. They hit two, injured one, and they killed another, a white man who was standing across the street from the Sweet's house on the lawn across the street. He had his back turned to the house! He was talking to the people up on the front porch, he wasn't doing anything. But they fired off into the crowd, and they hit him in the back, and they killed him.

Lester Graham: So, what happened?

Kevin Boyle: Then the police, who were just kind of standing around, sprung into action. They raced into the house, they arrested all eleven people in the house. So anyone in the house. Though they had no idea who fired the shot that killed the man. And within two days they were all charged with first-degree murder. Every single one of them. Premeditated murder.

Lester Graham: That case didn't go that well for the prosecutors.

Kevin Boyle: No it didn't. The NAACP, then the leading Civil Rights organization in the country, heard about the case within a couple of days, and they announced that they would mount a defense for the Sweets when they went on trial. And they went on trial in November 1925 in Detroit. The NAACP would come to the defense. The NAACP decided right off the bat, that they wanted a white lawyer. And the reason was, that they knew there was going to be an all-white jury. And the last thing they wanted to do was to have a black lawyer arguing that black people had the right to kill a white guy in Detroit in 1925 so that they could move into a white neighborhood. That's a disaster for a PR move in 1925. So they went in search of a white lawyer. And then they got one!

Lester Graham: A pretty famous one!

Kevin Boyle: Yes! It happened to be the greatest criminal defense attorney of his time. Arguably, in all of American history. His name was Clarence Darrow. And this happened to be, in 1925, the summer of what we now think of as his most famous trial, the famous Scopes Monkey Trial. That was the summer of '25. His next trial was in the Autumn of 1925 in defense of those eleven African Americans: Dr. Sweet, Mrs. Sweet, and their family and friends.

Lester Graham: As you might expect, they didn't get very far in that particular case. Resulted in a mistrial. They came back again, trying to charge someone in the house with murder, but they decided to not do all eleven at the same time. What happened then?

Kevin Boyle: Yeah. So what happened in the first trial was Darrow made his classic, dramatic defenses, and it ended up in a hung jury. So the prosecutor, figuring, well if I couldn't win it that way, he would pick one of the defendants. He would pick Dr. Sweet's little brother Henry. The reason they picked him, to try him alone in the second trial, was he was the only one, who on the night of the murder, said, "yeah I fired into the crowd!" Everyone else said, "I fired into the air!" or "I didn't fire at all," "I didn't know what was happening." And he said, "yes, it was a mob - I fired into it!" So they thought they couldn't convict him, they couldn't convict anyone. So they have another trial in the Spring of 1926. Darrow comes again, and they add a Detroit criminal defense lawyer, whose main job had been defending mobsters, and there were a lot of them in Detroit in the 1920s. And this time they actually get an acquittal. He is actually found not guilty of this crime. Which is a dramatic victory for civil rights activism. I think in that case, that's the reason that I think the story is so important, one of the reasons, and why I think preserving the house on Garland Avenue is so important.

Lester Graham: I want to ask you, what about the people in the mob that were throwing stones at the house and breaking windows and such. Did anybody get charged in that?

Kevin Boyle: Not a bit. One of the great ironies of the trial, to tell you the truth, there is an official law in Michigan that says what the size of a mob is, what constitutes a mob. It's fifteen armed people joining together - that's a mob. It's thirty unarmed people. And the prosecutor, which may not have been the best legal strategy - I'm no lawyer, but I don't think this is a good idea - he brought about eighty witnesses out from the street at the trial to say "Oh, I was out on the street that night. That was no mob!"

Lester Graham: Ha!

Kevin Boyle: So, no one got charged on the mob front. They basically what they did was say, you know, we're a bunch of neighbors, friendly people, standing out on the street. And it was only during the trial that Darrow, in one of his great cross-examinations, gets someone to admit that they were throwing stones at the house.

Lester Graham: Rachel, how do these court cases brought against the Sweets still echo in the law today?

Rachel Clark: Well one of the things that I find most interesting in the defense strategy was Darrow and the defense team used what was at the time a little known 1860 Supreme Court ruling, in a case called *Pond vs. the People of Michigan*. And in that case the Supreme Court stated that a man assaulted in his dwelling is not obligated to retreat, but may use such means as are absolutely necessary to repel the assailant from his house, or prevent his forceable entry, even to taking a life. And so that ruling is something that we understand today as a "Stand Your Ground"

law. And it was little-known, and as I said, it was a case from the Upper Peninsula of Michigan from 1860 that wound up in the Michigan Supreme Court, and that's what Darrow's team used.

Lester Graham: Kevin Boyle, how did Ossian Sweet's story go from there?

Kevin Boyle: I think it's one of the great tragedies of the American past. Dr. Sweet won this extraordinary case, but it cost him everything. His wife and child both died within a few years of tuberculosis, that to this day family members still say she contracted while she was in jail. And he moved back into that house. He moved into the house after a few years. He didn't move in immediately, but he moved back into the house. And he lived there until the mid-1950s. One of the great ironies of that entire time, he was paying off - he didn't have a mortgage on the house, he couldn't get one, African Americans couldn't get a mortgage to move into a white neighborhood. So essentially, he didn't even have the deed of the house until the 1950s. And then in the late 1950s, his practice went into decline, for a whole number of reasons, part of it physical. He had some physical problems that prevented him from practicing the transformations in the medical profession. His life went into decline. He lost the house, essentially for back taxes. And he then moved back into the African American inner-city, segregated neighborhood of "Black Bottom." He lived above a drug store at the end of his life. So he ended up back in the very place he sacrificed everything, not to be forced to live, to have the freedom to live wherever he wanted. And at the end of his life, that's where he ended up. And that combination of that, I believe, it's impossible to say for sure, led to the last act, which was in 1960, just as the Civil Rights Movement was sweeping across the South, Dr. Sweet took a handgun and shot himself in the head.

Lester Graham: Kevin Boyle is Professor of History at Northwestern University and the author of *Arc of Justice: A Saga of Race, Civil Rights, and Murder in the Jazz Age*. Thanks for telling Dr. Ossian Sweet's story.

Kevin Boyle: Thank you so much for letting me.

Lester Graham: And thanks so much to Michigan History Center's Rachel Clark. Thanks for your help.

Rachel Clark: Thank you.

Lester Graham: It was announced earlier this year that Detroit mayor Mike Duggan will receive a half-million dollar grant from the National Park Service to expand Dr. Ossian Sweet's historic district, much of it to be focused on the Sweet house at 2905 Garland.